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INITIAL LETTERS

BY

Douglas C. McMurtrie

PELHAM, N. Y.
BRIDGMAN PUBLISHERS
MCMXXVIII

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Introduction

INITIAL LETTERS far antedated the beginnings of printing for they were used extensively in manuscript books, appearing often in such volumes in very magnificent form, illuminated in colors and brilliant with gold and silver. They were peculiarly essential, too, in books of this character, the text of which ran on continuously, usually in double column, from the first page of the volume to the last page, without the break afforded by a chapter sink, the short page at the end of a chapter, or an occasional blank page.

Something was necessary to relieve this unbroken monotony and to call attention to the beginning of a new section or of a new subject in the book. The decorative initial letter served this purpose admirably and also added a touch of beauty which made the volume a possession highly to be prized.

With the advent of printing with movable types there was no material change in the style or appearance of books, the early printers following the style of the manuscript books just as closely as possible. Some authorities believe their purpose was to pass the volumes off as manuscripts and, in any event, to direct just as little attention as possible to the invention of a new art, so as to avoid arousing the enmity of the scribes and illuminators.

Seeking to copy the style of the handwritten books as closely as possible, it is no wonder, therefore, that the decorative initials which had served the manuscript book producers so well, should be taken over and adopted by the printers. The first plan was to leave blank spaces in the type text in which the initials should be put in by hand by the illuminator. But this was an expensive proceeding which detracted in considerable degree from the economies effected by the printing press.

So in 1457, we find splendid two-color initial letters, with elaborate floriation, appearing in the Psalter printed at Mainz in that year by Fust and Schoeffer—a volume considered by many the most magnificent book in printing history. There is close justaposition of the two colors (blue and red) yet all the existing copies

show an absolutely perfect register. There has been much discussion as to how this perfection of register could have been obtained, but the prevailing opinion is that the second color was an inset in the block, the main portion being inked first, and the inset then being inked separately and replaced in position. The printing in the two colors could thus be accomplished in one impression, with an absolute perfection of register.

The cost and difficulty of printing these initials must have been great for, though the same blocks appear in later editions of the same book, letters of like character appear in no other volumes printed by the celebrated Mainz partnership.

The next and natural step was to produce initials engraved on wood or metal blocks which could be incorporated in the type form and the complete page printed in one operation, with no added expense beyond that for the original engraving of the decorative letter.

Such engraved initial letters were first used in the same year, 1472, by three different printers: Gunther Zainer at Augsburg, Johann Bämler at Augsburg, and Johann Koelhoff at Cologne. The initials used were embellished with floral decoration only, but Zainer used

pictorial initials showing human figures in his Bible of 1477.

The "father" of decorative initials, however, was Erhard Ratdolt, a native of Augsburg who first earned fame as a printer at Venice, but later returned to print and publish books—most of them of liturgical character—in his home city. He, of all the fifteenth century printers, made the best use of initial letters and borders printed in conjunction with type.

In 1476 Ratdolt made use of initials of open character, shown on page 15, and in 1477 of decorative letters on a square ground such as we are familiar with, and of which type there are many representatives reproduced in the present volume. A number of Ratdolt's decorative borders, showing how he used initial, type, and border in combination, are reproduced in my "Book Decoration," a companion volume in this series.

Ratdolt had a partner named Bernhard Maler (in Latin Pictor), who, because the meaning of his name in both German and Latin was "painter," has been generally credited with the design and engraving of the initials and borders. As to this, however, there is no conclusive evidence.

Decorative initials embellished with human

figures, animals, urns and trophies, jardinieres and birds, are characteristic of the Venetian printers, while those of Lyons favored grotesque representations of fabulous animals, human figures, and so forth. At Paris human heads made frequent appearance in decorative initials; many were of the criblé type, with white dots on a black background giving a pleasing gray effect. In that city some letters, particularly the L, were elaborately flourished in calligraphic style.

In the printing of liturgical books, especial attention was given to embellishment and these volumes occasioned the design of many splendid initial letters. The Canon of the Mass, it will be recalled, begins with a T and especial pains were lavished on the execution of this letter.

In the early part of the sixteenth century many eminent artists, such as Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein, turned their abilities to book decoration, as well as men of lesser fame.

Of later development were decorative blocks with a square mortised out in the center, in which a piece of type for any desired letter could be inserted. And in the eighteenth century some charming decorative initials were made up with units of type ornament.

The present handbook cannot, of course, cover the whole field of decorative initials, but the attempt has been to reproduce a number of series of good initials which accord with present-day taste. The choice has been restricted to those designed in the classical tradition. In the modernistic style many interesting forms of initials have been designed but these demand treatment as a practically separate subject. In the initials reproduced in this volume, the student or artist will, without doubt, find many suggestions of value.

Of course, initial letters do not necessarily have to be decorative. In many of the best designed books plain type letters are used with telling effect. When using type initials it is important to see that the indention of the type corresponds accurately with the width of the letter used. The indention for an M, for example, would be far greater than for an I. The remaining letters of the first word of the text should be set in capitals (sometimes in small capitals) and the top of the initial should align accurately with the top of these large or small capitals, while the bottom of the initial should align with the bottom of the non-descending letters in the last line indented. This is a rule of vital importance, all too often disregarded.

When observed it adds greatly to the appearance of any unit of composition. The same rule regarding alignment applies to rectangular decorative initials as well.

Plain type initial letters can also rise above the line at the beginning of a text, and be set either flush at the left of the column or be indented—a practice frequently observed. In this case the bottom of the initial should align with the bottom of the non-descending letters in the first line.

The average number of lines indented for an initial letter varies from two to five or six lines according to the importance of the division of the text at the start of which it stands.

Any good type of initial, properly used, will add considerably to the most ordinary piece of printing without increasing the cost of paper, printing, and binding; the only additional cost being for the initial blocks themselves. The appearance of the average novel, for example, would gain tremendously by the introduction of a well-designed series of decorative initials at the beginnings of chapters. And the added expense would be negligible.

In short, initial letters are an important factor in the beautification of books whether produced in manuscript or printed form, to say

nothing of their importance in the layout of effective advertising, which is only a specialized form of the art of bookmaking.

In the compilation of a book of this character it has, of course, been necessary to draw on many sources for material. The classic designs, however, have become a common heritage and I consider it a useful service to pass them on to others. I desire especially to acknowledge the courtesy of the Mergenthaler Linotype Company in supplying electrotypes of their Caslon and Jenson series of initials and to the Ludlow Typograph Company for supplying their Delphian initials.

DOUGLAS C. McMURTRIE

Chicago, July 30, 1928

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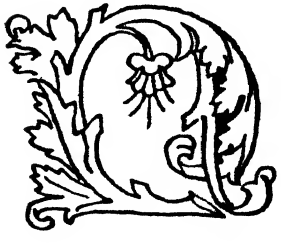

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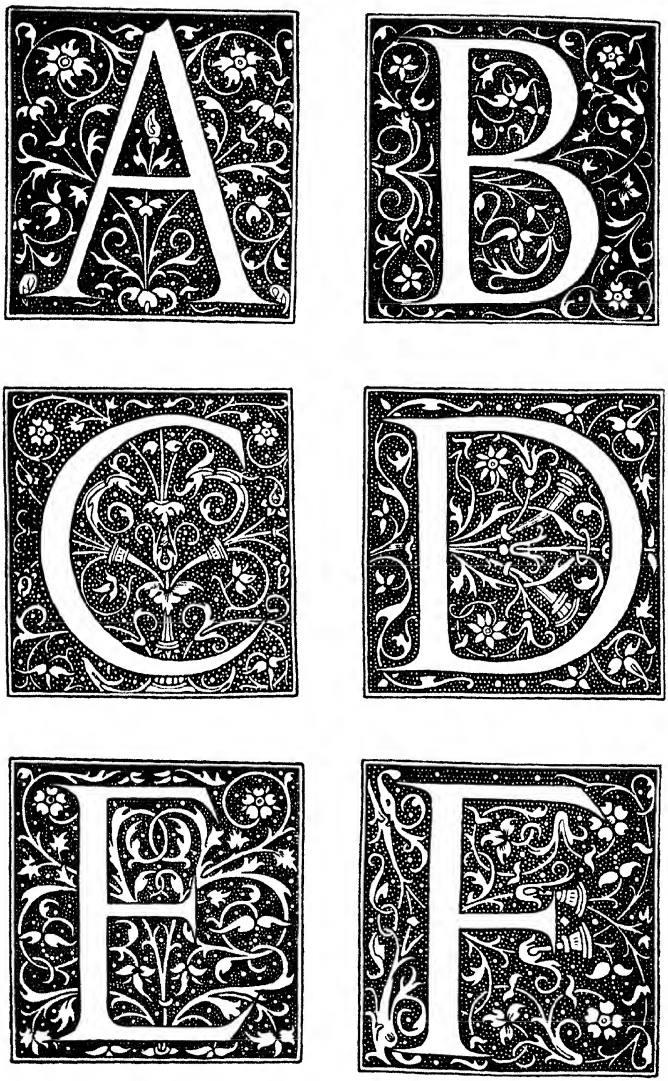

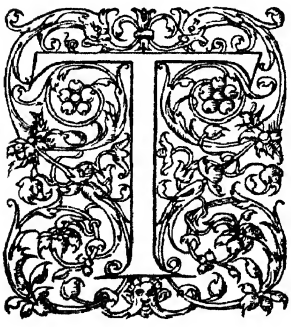
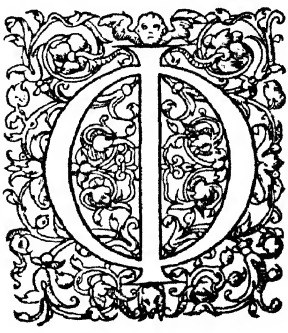

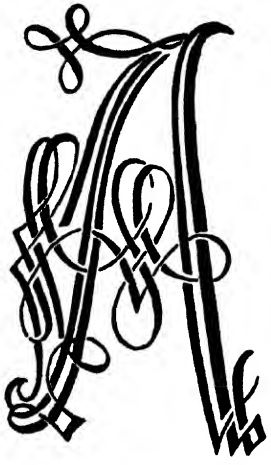

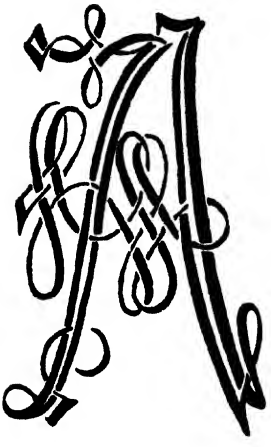

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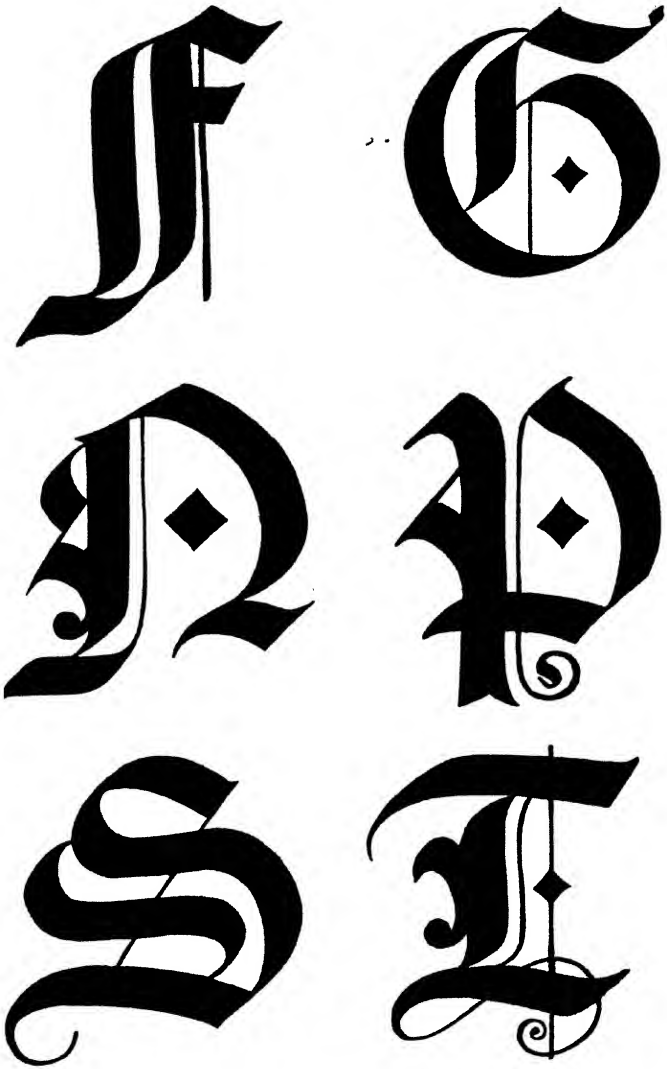

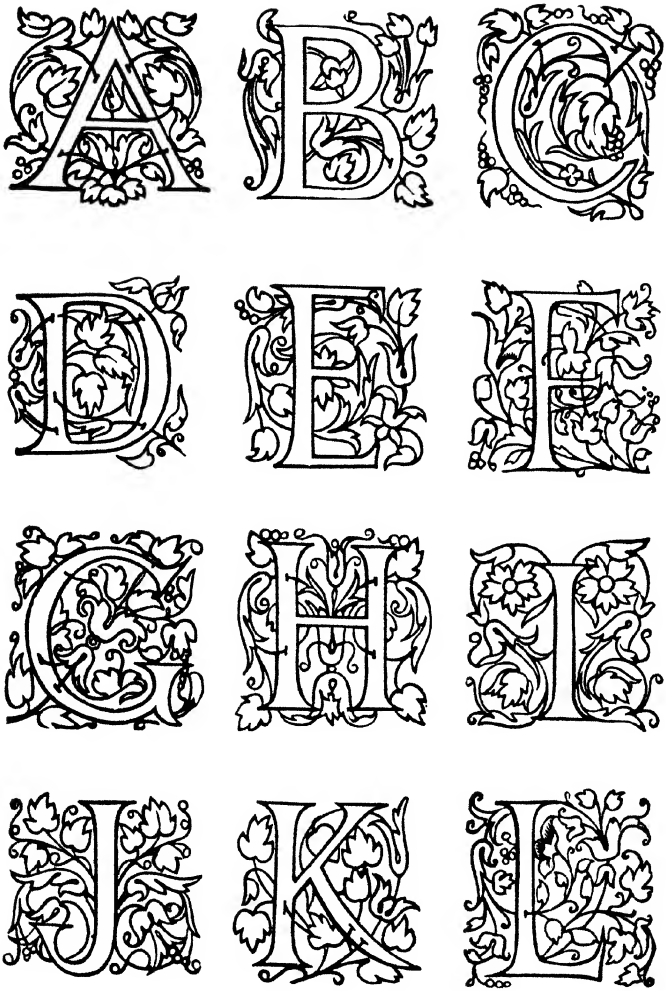

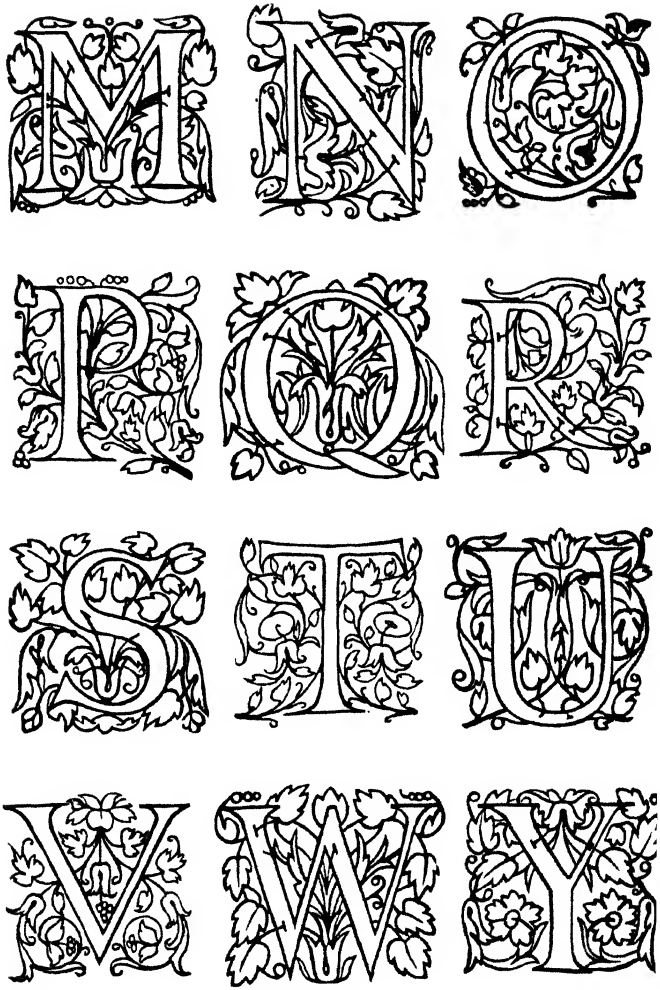
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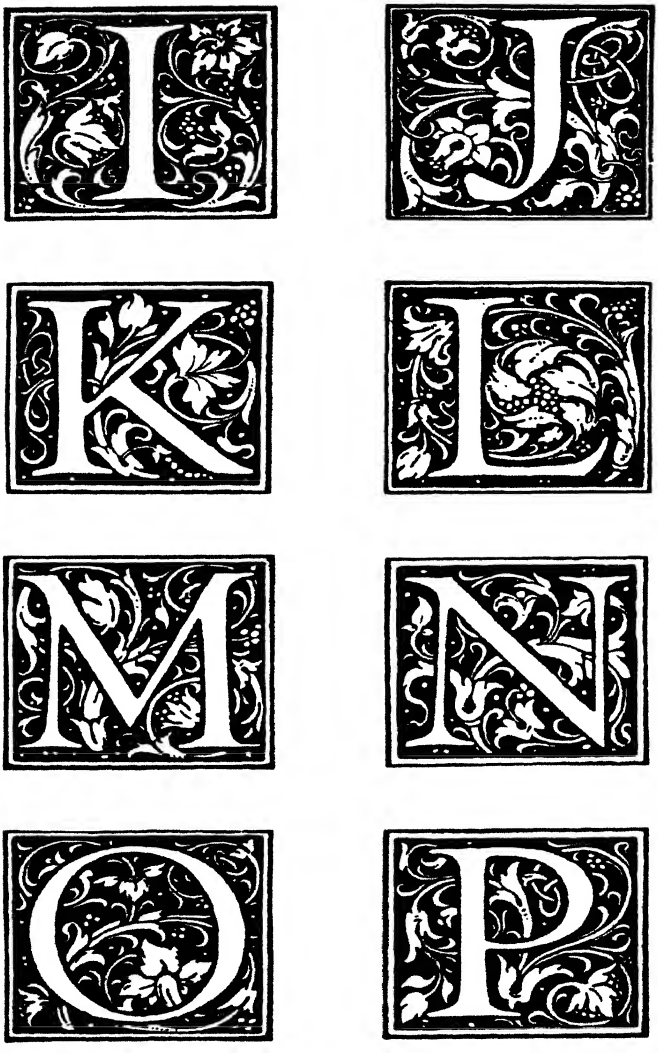

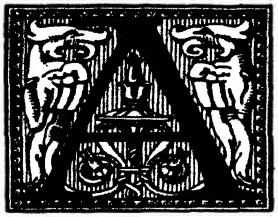

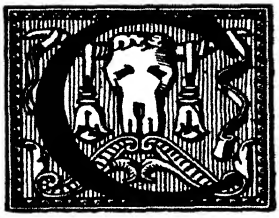

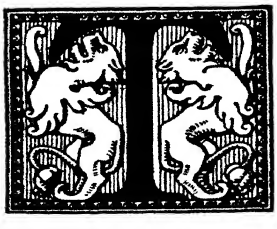

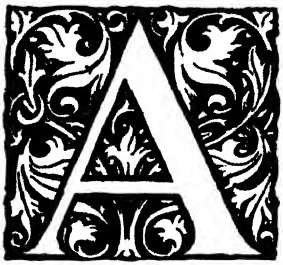

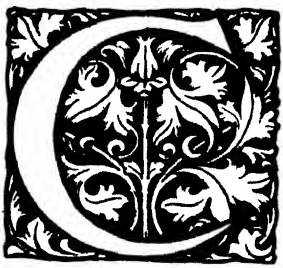

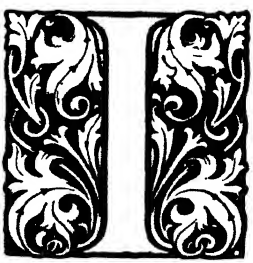

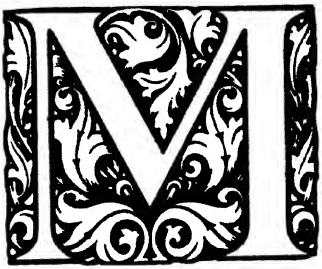

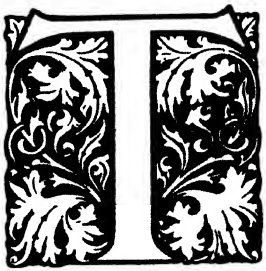

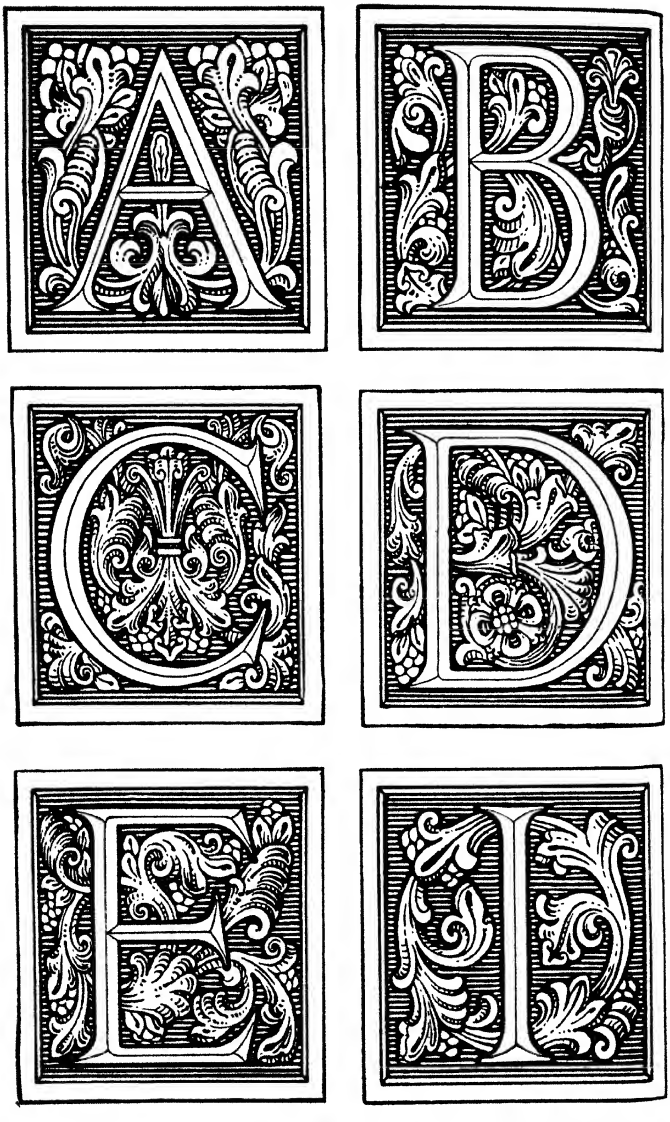

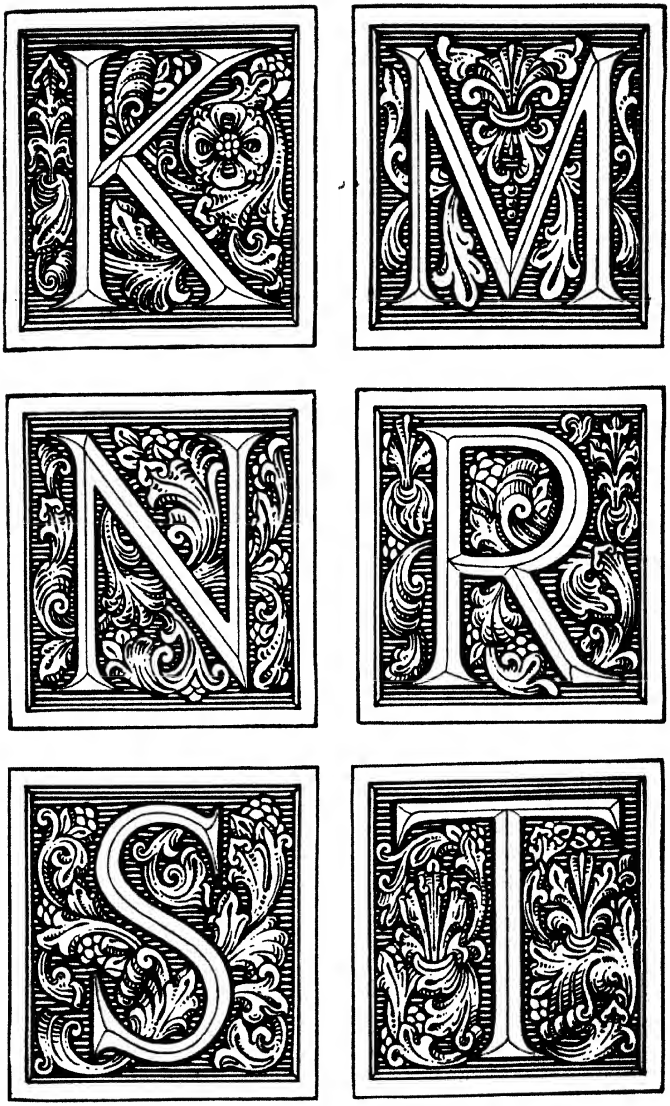

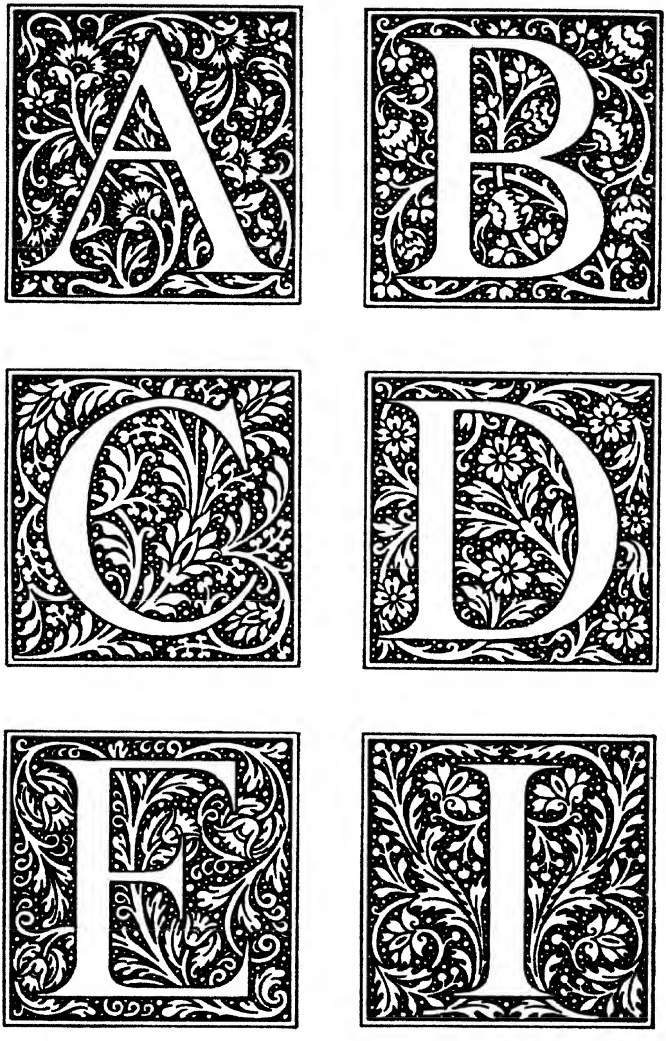
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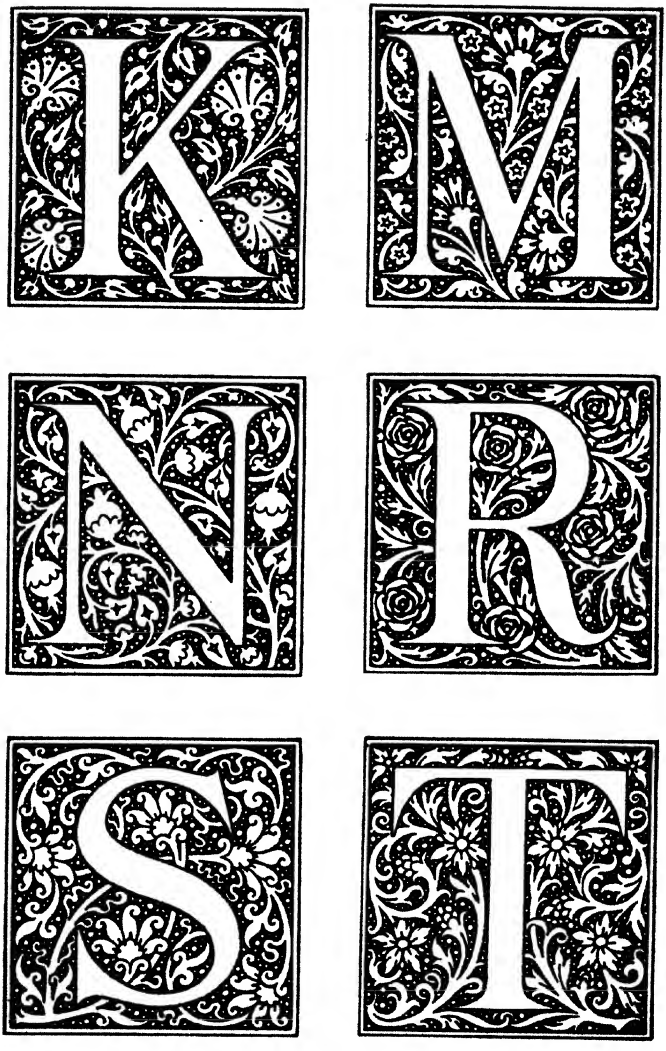
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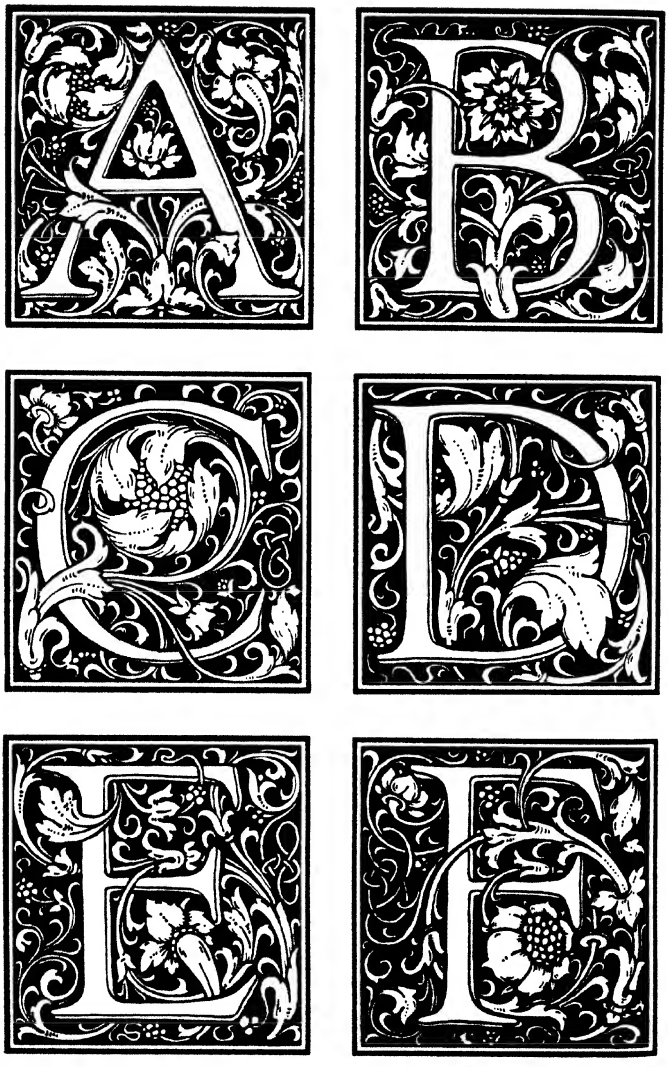
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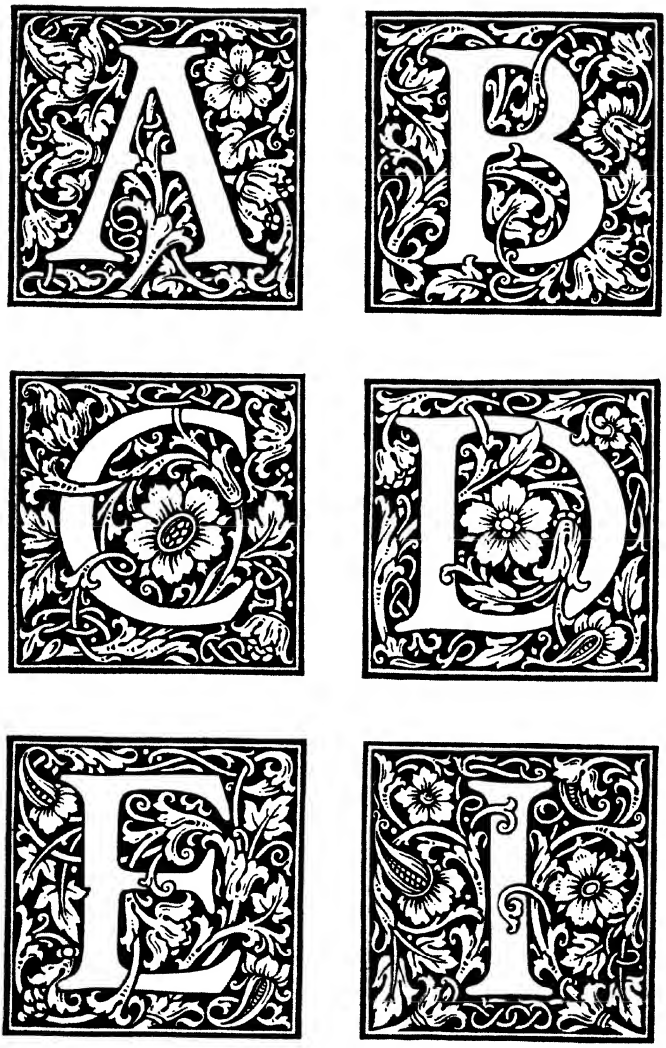
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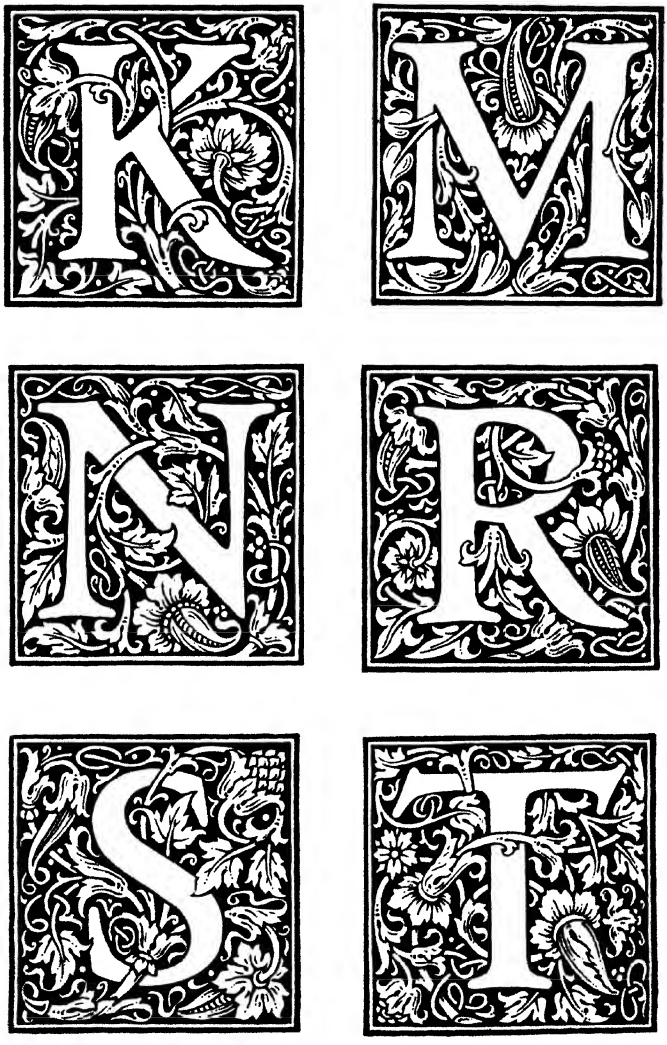

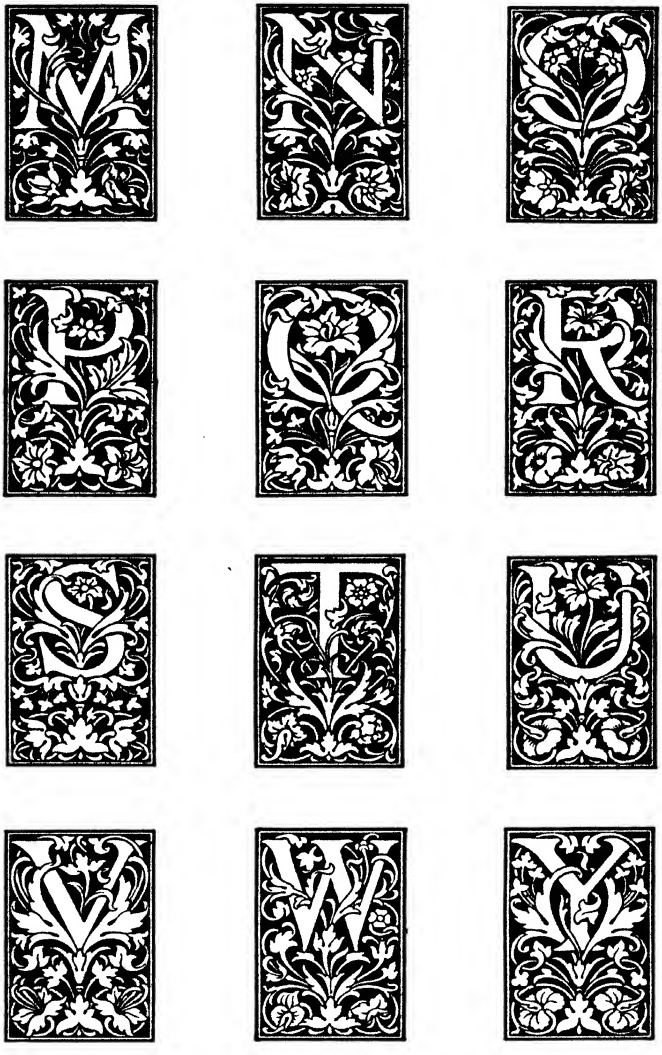

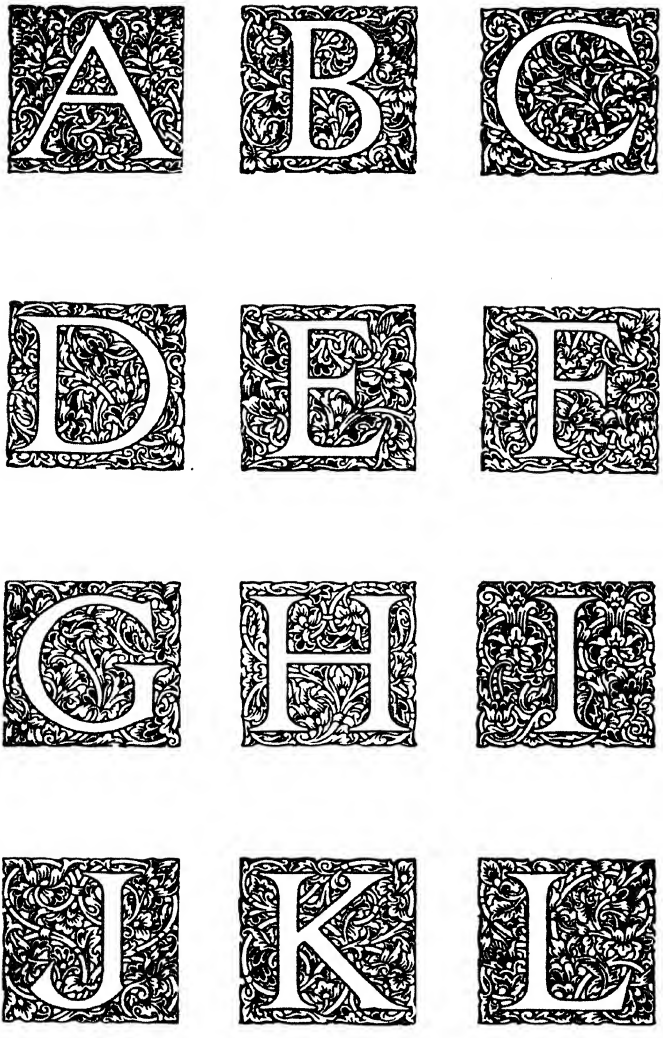
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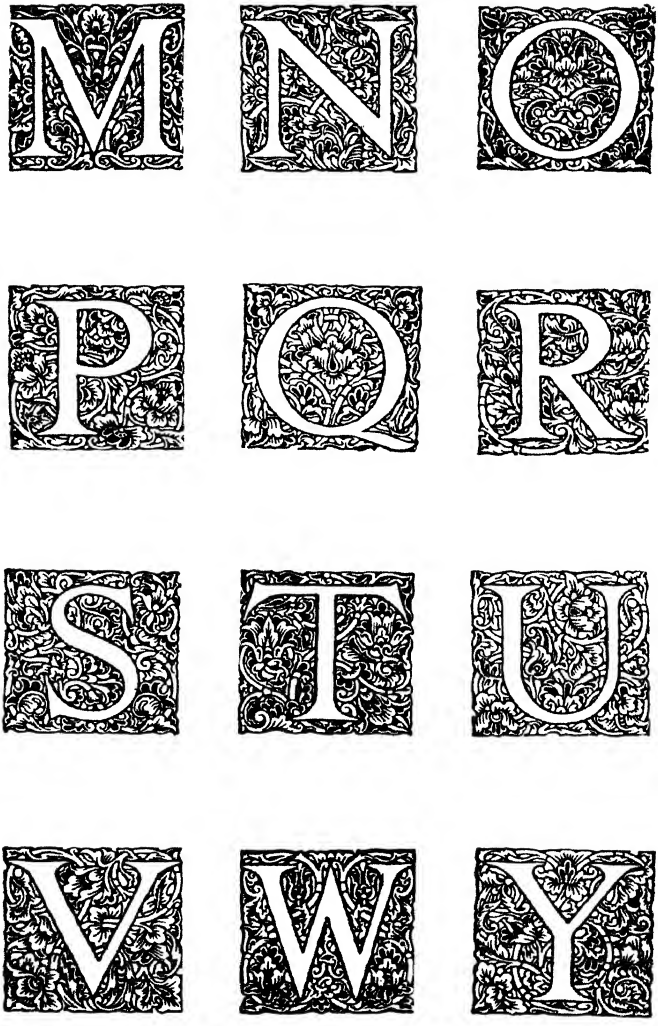
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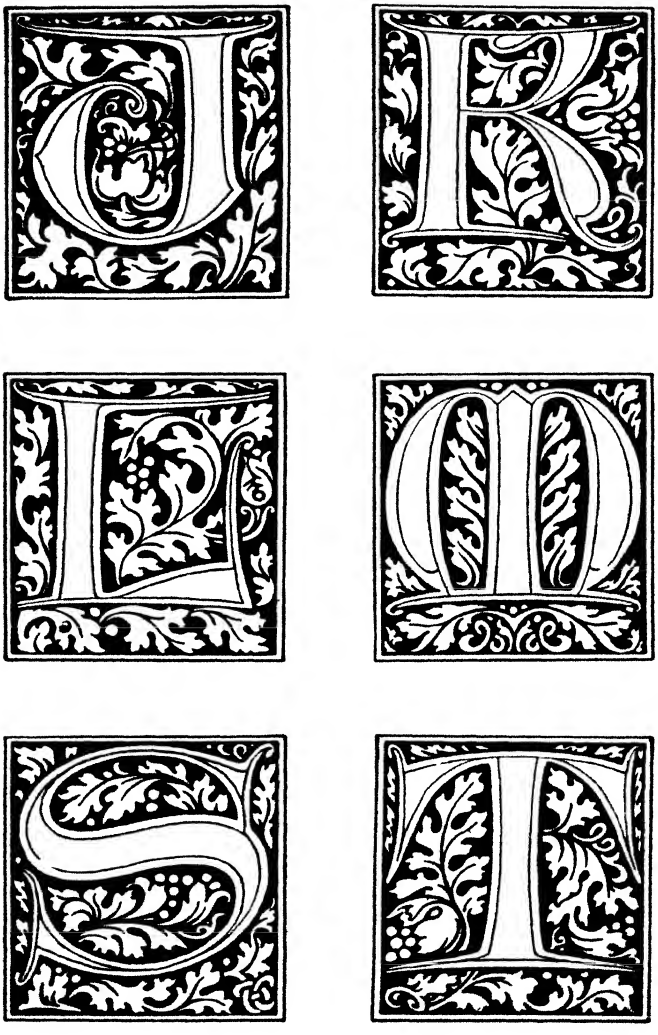

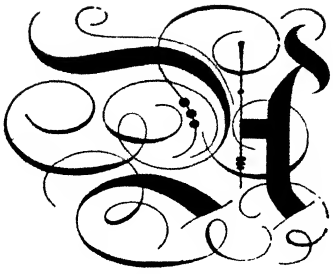

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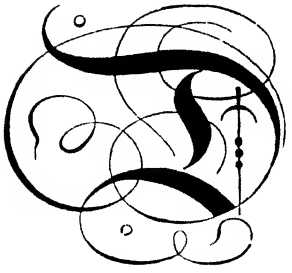

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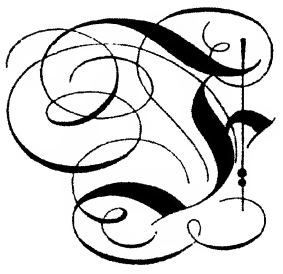

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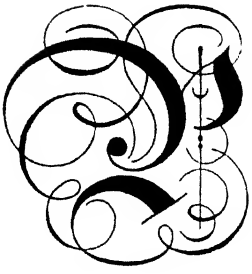

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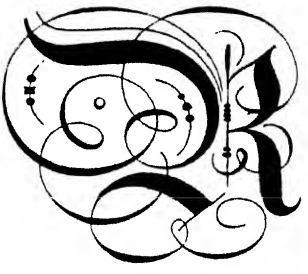

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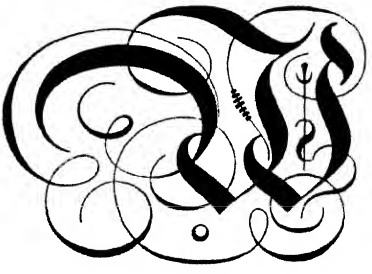

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